

Comparing Attitudes and Practices Among Educators Serving Large Proportions of English Learners in California and Three Other States

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For several years, WestEd's Measure to Learn and Improve (MLI) project team has kept California state policy leaders informed about the statewide implementation of the California Academic Standards in English language arts and mathematics, by summarizing and disseminating results from the RAND Corporation's annual American Educator Panel (AEP) surveys of teachers and principals.¹ This brief contrasts the perceptions of California educators who serve a relatively high proportion of English learner (EL) students (i.e., over 25 percent of students) with the perceptions of educators who are serving a relatively high proportion of EL students in three comparison states.

In addition to asking questions on a variety of education topics, the May 2018 AEP surveys asked California teachers and principals to report the proportion of EL students in their classrooms or in their schools, respectively. While the authors acknowledge that EL students as a group are not monolithic, with individual students varying both in background and needs, this brief makes use of the teacher- and principal-level EL variable to contrast the perceptions of California educators serving more than 25 percent English learners with those of educators serving similar student

populations in Florida, New York, and Texas.² The survey-elicited opinions of these groups of educators align in many areas, but they differ on issues related to instructional materials, data use, and social and emotional learning (SEL), as described below.

Considerations in choosing materials. Teachers across the national AEP sample were asked to rank the factors that are important to them in determining which curricula, programs, and/or instructional tools they use in their classroom. These preferences varied between the teachers educating high shares of EL students in California and teachers serving a similar share of EL students in the other states. Comparatively, a higher proportion of these California teachers valued usability and easy implementation (+15 percentage points) and student engagement (+6 percentage points) as top considerations in materials selection (table 1). Conversely, teachers across Florida, New York, and Texas that were serving a relatively high proportion of EL students more commonly cited the materials' alignment to the statewide assessment (+18 percentage points) and scaffolding support to meet student needs (+7 percentage points) as top considerations.³

In addition, on a separate question, the California teachers serving a relatively high proportion of EL students were less likely than their counterparts in the comparison states to report having monthly professional development focused on adapting materials (13 percent in California versus 27 percent elsewhere) or on implementing materials (11 percent versus 23 percent elsewhere).⁴

Table 1. Percentages of teachers in California and, collectively, in the comparison states who taught more than 25 percent EL students and who identified the listed consideration as one of the two most important factors in determining what curricula, programs, and instructional tools to use in their classrooms

Consideration in choosing materials	CA (n = 167)	FL, NY, TX (n = 361)
Alignment to Common Core State Standards or my state's standards	60	56
How engaging materials are for my students	47*	41*
Usability and ease of implementation	33*	18*
Scaffolding support to meet student needs (e.g., English language learners)	30*	37*
Recommendation or requirement from my school district	20	21
Alignment to my state assessment	8*	26*

* p < 0.1

Data use practices among principals. The May 2018 AEP surveys asked principals how often they look at data to help inform their decisions or their feedback to staff about instruction, programming, or resource allocation. California principals reported looking at data less frequently than their peers across the three comparison states. About 55 percent of these California principals reported looking at data more often than monthly, compared to 65 percent of their peers in the comparison states (table 2). Instead, the California principals were more likely than the comparison principals to report looking at data a few times during the year (table 2).

In addition to reviewing data less frequently, these California principals were also less likely than the comparison group to report having received sufficient support to use data for decision-making and feedback. Seventy-one percent of these California principals said that their data support was somewhat or totally sufficient, compared to 91 percent in the comparison group (table 3).

Supports for social and emotional learning.

Survey recipients were asked to select up to three strategies that would improve their ability to develop the social and emotional skills of their students. Compared to their peers in Florida, New York, and Texas, California teachers and principals serving relatively high proportions of EL students significantly more often (by about +8 percentage points for each role type) identified “strategies for delivering multi-tiered supports for different types of students’ social and emotional needs” as one of their top three SEL needs. In addition, California teachers in this group were also more likely than their peers in comparison states (46 percent versus 38 percent, respectively) to identify “strategies for engaging students in their own social and emotional development” as one of their top three SEL needs. Conversely, on this same question, these California teachers were less likely than their peers in the comparison states to highlight “materials,” “strategies for educator self-care,” or “strategies for fostering an environment to develop students’ social and emotional skills” as top SEL needs (table 4).

Table 2. Frequency of data review among principals with more than 25 percent EL students, in California and, collectively, across the comparison states in 2017/18, by percentage

During the current school year (2017/18), how often did you personally look at data to help inform your decisions and/or feedback to staff about instruction, programming, or resource allocation?	CA (n = 105)	FL, NY, TX (n = 127)
Never	1	1
A few times this year	19	8
About monthly	25	27
More often than once a month	55*	65*

* p < 0.1

Table 3. Sufficiency of data use supports among principals with more than 25 percent EL students, in California and, collectively, across the comparison states, by percentage

During the current school year (2017/18), how adequate was the support you received in using student and school data to inform your decisions and/or feedback to staff?	CA (n = 105)	FL, NY, TX (n = 127)
Totally insufficient	11	4
Somewhat insufficient	17	5
Somewhat sufficient	52*	59*
Totally sufficient	19*	32*

* p < 0.1

California principals in schools serving a relatively high proportion of EL students and, collectively, their peers in the comparison states also differed in *when* they received SEL-related training. Principals in the comparison states more often reported receiving SEL training during their pre-service/preparation (29 percent versus 20 percent for California principals), while these California principals more commonly reported receiving such training on the job (78 percent versus 66 percent across the comparison states).

Conclusion. California is a unique state not only because of its large population, but also for its framework for English language arts and development, which mandates that all EL students in California be provided with integrated English language development across content areas. Even so, these recent survey results suggest that there are many areas of alignment in their experiences compared to those of educators in other large states who are also serving high numbers of EL students. The areas where differences are evident, summarized in this brief, suggest additional supports that

Table 4. Percentage of educators in California and, collectively, across the comparison states who identified the listed activity, strategy, or resource among the top-3 most beneficial to developing the social and emotional skills of their students

Activity, strategy, or resource	Teachers with more than 25 percent EL students, by percentage CA (n = 167)	Teachers with more than 25 percent EL students, by percentage FL, NY, TX (n = 361)	Principals with more than 25 percent EL students, by percentage CA (n = 108)	Principals with more than 25 percent EL students, by percentage FL, NY, TX (n = 129)
Strategies for engaging students in their own social and emotional development	46*	38*	37	36
More engagement from parents and families	44	40	27	31
Strategies for delivering multi-tiered supports for different types of students' social and emotional needs	36*	28*	44*	36*
Strategies for incorporating social and emotional skill development into classroom curriculum	35	32	31	36
Time (e.g., for planning, collaboration with other teachers)	31	36	39	42
Strategies for fostering an environment to develop students' social and emotional skills	22	26	19*	27*
Explicit prioritization and support from school or district administration	20	17	12	9
Adequate financial resources or allocations in the budget to implement programs and practices	17	16	29	24
More knowledge of connections to existing resources and supports available through school, community groups, nonprofits, and government	16	14	12	14
Materials (e.g., curricula)	13*	20*	16	18
Strategies for educator self-care	4*	10*	10	15
Technical assistance support	0	2	3	1

* p < 0.1

might be useful in California — for example, training teachers to more reliably implement or adapt high-quality standards-aligned materials, or building the capacity for more rigorous data-driven decision making and feedback among California's

principals. Today, as state, county, and district leaders across the Golden State grapple with providing differentiated supports to districts and schools in very different contexts, these considerations can lay a helpful foundation for future work.

References

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Endnotes

1 The RAND Corporation's American Educator Panel (AEP) surveys were originally launched in 2014 and are administered several times a year in more than 20 states. To create the panels, RAND first sampled 2,300 U.S. public schools, stratifying for balance by grade span (primary, middle, high, and combined), school size, poverty status, population density, and geographic region. Educators who change schools remain on the panel, and new members are added periodically so the panel remains representative over time. Educators in California, Florida, New York, and Texas were over-sampled to afford state-level representativeness. For the May 2018 administration of the AEP surveys, 492 of 879 California teachers (56 percent) and 300 of 1,056 California principals (28 percent) responded. The average margins of error for the results presented here thus generally range from ± 5 –8 percentage points. Subgroup analyses/cross-tabulations were carried out using the raw/unweighted counts of respondents, who were grouped according to whether they reported teaching/overseeing more than 25 percent EL students at their site. Only statistically significant subgroup differences are presented in this brief.

2 These three states were selected as a comparison group because they represent some of the most populous states in the country and have also historically enrolled large numbers of EL students. According to the U.S. Department of Education (2017), in 2015, California enrolled over 1.3 million EL students (who comprised 21.0 percent of the state-wide student population), while Texas enrolled 892,082 (16.8 percent), Florida enrolled 268,189 (9.6 percent), and New York enrolled 216,378 (8.0 percent).

3 California teachers serving a higher share of EL students were 11 percentage points more likely that their peers in the comparison states to report having at least a semester of student teaching prior to becoming a teacher of record (90 percent versus 79 percent).

4 California's standards and frameworks have rolled out at different periods, and many California districts are gradually moving away from teacher-created materials (CFTL, 2018). Across the state, curriculum decisions are generally (at least initially) made at two levels: the state makes recommendations and district leaders then choose from among those recommendations. But recent research suggests that even districts that have adopted the same curriculum materials can take broadly different approaches to implementation and to "filling the gaps" they have identified in the materials, and "there are few formal structures for districts across the state to share information about what works and doesn't with their peers" (Perry, Marple, & Reade, 2017, p. iii).

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